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ABSTRACT

Although many agree that institutional research in higher education has come of age and is accepted as a part of institutional management, great variations exist in the extent to which institutional research findings are synthesized and utilized in management decision-making. A number of reasons can be identified as accounting for this phenomenon, among which are: (1) poor "selling" of the institutional research function to institutional leaders; (2) lukewarm support of the institutional research function; (3) failure to follow up after the report and/or recommendation has been made; (4) improper balancing of short-range problem solving and long-term considerations; and (5) existing constraints on executive management's decision-making alternatives. It should be noted that institutional researchers report to line managers who make the ultimate, binding decisions. Understanding and living within this framework of basic constraints and responsibilities is absolutely essential to any successful institutional research effort. (Author/JDS)

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Implementing Institutional Research Findings

Many would agree that institutional research (I R) in higher education has come of age. However, there is also apparent an unevenness in the support and utilization of I R findings -- which is, perhaps, its most serious 'defect' as it seeks to serve the managers of academe.

In theory, the recognition, status, and acceptance of I R as a management staff/service adjunct is generally not in serious challenge. Yet it appears equally true that tremendous variations exist in the extent to which - in actual practice - I R findings are synthesized and utilized in management decision-making: why?

What follows are the views of but one I R practitioner. Others may well identify further dimensions to be added. However, if what follows does stimulate a dialog in this area, it will have served its purpose, namely to answer the question - why does so much I R slip into the F & F classification: to File and to Forget!?

One obvious 'reason' to be offered relates to the competence level of the I R function. Perhaps this assessment-level reflects a poor job of 'selling' I R to the in-house 'real' leaders, (whether or not these individuals carry the 'titles' of assigned rank and responsibility).

Or it might be the practical consequences of luke-warm support of the I R function by executive management. Such tepid endorsement quickly becomes evident to other offices, centers, divisions, etc. within the institution. And again, it might also accurately reflect a level of I R job performance which is something less than acceptance/helpful to the organization it purports to serve.

Yet another reason why too much I R effort ends up in the circular file (which is the practical equivalent when it is placed in the F & F category!), is to be found in the

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failure to follow-up. The institutional researcher - like any other individual within the organization - must 'compete' with these others who ask for attention (decisions) from the executive to whom the institutional researcher reports. The I R task is not complete for the researcher when the report and/or recommendation has been made.

True - the researcher does not have responsibility for establishing priorities of actions to be taken. However, this does not mean that follow-up action is to be ignored. Judicious follow-up inquiry serves to call the project to the attention of the line executive decision-maker. If such follow-up inquiry results in a decision that implementation of the I R finding is to be set aside to a later date, or perhaps even tabled, indefinitely - then so be it. The decision has been reached and it is then time to move along to the next assignment.

A fourth category of 'obstacles' to the fuller implementation of I R findings is to be found in the analysis/synthesis syndrome. This alliterative semantic relates to the ever-present task - how to effectively budget time and effort between the problem-solving, immediate-consequence projects, and those other activities of long-range thrust which are to be found through the careful synthesis of numbers of I R inquiries and findings.

Obviously, a fifth, umbrella-category exists for the Institutional researcher - the realm of 'political' timeliness. Although I R findings may well point in one direction, existing resources constraints and other realities of what will, and what will not, be acceptable to executive management, are dimensions which must be accepted - whether or not they appear to be 'sound' practices/decisions. Accommodating to this dimension of 'reality' is probably the single, most important adjustment to be made by the institutional researcher.

As staff, adjunct personnel, we institutional researchers report to line managers who make the ultimate, binding decisions. If we fail to learn what constraints, values, and priorities underlie their decisions/actions, we commit a grave error.

As researchers, we do not make those very difficult decisions which commit the institution to a course of action. Nor are we, in any sense, a substitute for the very demanding administrative function of reaching sound decisions. We serve as staff-service agents for executive management - to generate information which will, potentially, help them in reaching decisions. Understanding and living within this framework of basic responsibilities, is absolutely essential to any successful I R effort!

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